

BEACH PARTY, Oahu, 1951

Sometime late in March

The Taussig was finally on the way back to San Diego after weathering “the coldest winter” in Korean waters. Salt-stained and rusty, we eased up to the “Baker” dock in Pearl Harbor, familiar from past visits in the Pasadena and Bairoko. We were greeted by a line of hula girls and a Navy band. This was all exciting, but our minds were more on San Diego and reunions. The euphoria balloon was shortly punctured by the news that we were to remain for a week at Pearl to paint the ship and undergo administrative inspection! Administrative inspection was – and is – a regular periodic review of ship’s records and reports; delayed in our case by the circumstances under which we had been operating in the West Pacific.

The inspection was greeted stoically by the officers, who were the ones mainly involved, but painting the ship was an insult to everyone! We had expected to come home to a dockside welcome, wives and sweethearts (May they never meet!) waiting on the pier, white hankies waving as the ship hove into sight, bearing all the marks and scars of those brutal months at sea. As it would be, the ship would look as though we had just cruised in from the dockyard in San Francisco! (Our worst fears were fulfilled when we finally did slide into San Diego early one afternoon. There was no pier or waving hankies. We were assigned to one of the more remote mooring buoys. That meant having to run a liberty boat schedule for the fifteen or twenty minute run to one of two fleet landings and keeping to a strict schedule of returns! This all figures in another story.)

One early and delightful task, however, was to call Lincoln, Nebraska, telephone number 3-7354 (A number the most profound dementia could not erase from my memory!) to let June know our arrival schedule and launch her travel to California. That done, ship’s work again took precedence. Thereby hangs the tale:

The destroyer division Chaplain, a lieutenant -- whose name and face I couldn’t recall even if I wanted to, which I don’t – arranged a morale-boosting Hawaiian beach party for the crews of the four ships in the division. The location was one of the near-by public beaches. An unlimited supply of beer was laid on, and five or six busses reserved from the Navy motor pool scheduled for transportation. For some reason, shades of things yet to come) I was detailed to assist the Chaplain, along with a couple of brand new Ensigns and one old and indifferent Chief Petty Officer.

Some context: (1) The mood was not totally happy, owing to the delay, and (2) one of the partiers was a ship’s cook from the Taussig, who was a mean and violent person, as well as a fleet boxing champion. As the afternoon progressed and the beer flowed, the mood of the party turned ugly. Ugly, may not be precisely the right term, because on similar occasions a rousing good fight could be expected. Somewhere along the way, the Chaplain, in charge, disappeared and I never saw him again, ever. He disappeared from the face of the earth, so far as the Taussig was concerned.

I was senior officer present when the fight began and responsible accordingly! There were probably a couple of hundred sailors involved, divided roughly into two categories, (A) the ones who were going to take out their accumulated resentments on the cook aforementioned; (B) the ones defending him in the interest of maintaining the peace – a microcosm of world history. I detailed the CPO to call for the busses and stationed myself as close as I could get to the cook. I was keenly aware that an officer should never lay violent hands on an enlisted man, but in the melee, that maxim proved impossible to observe, especially when the busses arrived and we started shoving bodies into them. The fights continued in the busses as they drove off and I have a clear memory of the sweet old Chief Petty Officer walking around safely outside a bus shouting “Knock it off!” through the open windows. He was loyal and well-intentioned. The ensigns had disappeared somewhere.

As the busses, one-by-one, filled and shoved off back to the ships, the crowd diminished proportionately, but the fighting continued to the last. I had the cook in hand, and at one point put him on the ground – fleet boxing champion! It’s amazing what adrenalin can accomplish. He and I were the last ones on the last of, I think, six busses. I shoved him into a seat next the window and started to sit down on the aisle seat at which point a very large, very drunk, red-eyed (I remember!) sailor came toward me with a switch-blade knife. He said, “Mr. House, you’re a good officer, but I’m gonna to get that son of a bitch.” Somewhere, somehow, I had retrieved my own wet towel and bathing suit. I slapped the knife hand with the wet towel (It was also sandy, I remember. So it had to have been dropped.) The sailor dropped the knife, I put my foot on it, picked it up and threw it out the bus window. It may rust in the Hawaiian sand to this day, but never serve as evidence! (I have also since reflected that the slap with the towel probably served as a face-saving excuse for that sailor to drop the knife “involuntarily”.)

We got back to the ship, where everybody was restricted to their ship and by supper time were concluding that it had been a rousing good party. For myself, I was never questioned about what had happened; but back on the ship I looked at Uncle Wag’s ring I was wearing and saw that the clamps holding the red stone were clogged with flesh! Uncle Wag would have been delighted. The old railroad man always did think I was being raised a pantywaist!